

More land on Fresno Co. peak preserved

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Black Mountain has become a Noah's Ark for hundreds of Sierra foothill species, and more of the 3,600-foot peak soon will be protected from development.

The eastern Fresno County mountain is noteworthy because it is home to about 90% of plant and animal species found in the Central Sierra, said Jeannette Tuitele-Lewis, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, which is in the process of obtaining a 680-acre conservation easement.

That easement, so far the largest chunk set aside for preservation, brings the conservancy closer to its goal of preserving 4,200 acres -- about 75% of the mountain. The conservancy now oversees about 1,700 acres on Black Mountain.

With so many species, it's important to keep Black Mountain as close to its natural state as possible, she said.

In all, the mountain is home to 218 native plant species. Black Mountain is the site of the largest population on private land of *Carpenteria Californica*, a flower only found in the Sierra between the Kings and San Joaquin rivers. Animals making their home on the mountain include the threatened Valley elderberry long-horned beetles, the colorful California newt as well as black bears and eagles.

By comparison, the conservancy's studies show that Tivy Mountain near Squaw Valley east of Fresno, the site of another preserve, has 131 plant species.

"You find almost the entire suite of foothill species on one mountain," Tuitele-Lewis said of Black Mountain.

"You normally have to take in a much larger area to find that many species."

Part of the reason the mountain is home to such a vast swath of species is because it is the highest peak in the eastern Fresno County foothills and receives almost twice as much rain on average as even the hills a few miles to the west.

The Sierra Foothill Conservancy has been working since 1996 to preserve the mountain and hopes to get a \$314,000 state grant to pay for the conservation easement.

Under the conservation easement, the landowner will be paid to give up development rights, and also to allow the conservancy to take over land management decisions, including public access. By agreement, no additional structures can be built unless related to grazing.

If the land is sold, the easement continues to be attached to the property under most circumstances.

The easement will help keep wildlife habitat intact and reduce potential air and water pollution while maintaining a family's ranching legacy, said Bob Kingman, Mount Lassen-area manager for the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, who has structured many property owner-land trust agreements. The public also benefits with more open space and less water and air pollution, he added.

In addition to species protection, the land acquisition will protect two waterways that empty into Dry Creek, a tributary to the San Joaquin River, Tuitele-Lewis said.

The easement's funding was approved by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency that covers 22 foothill and mountain counties to conserve land and protect Sierra water and species by issuing grants for easements and land purchases.

The acreage for the Black Mountain easement, owned by the Atkinson-Piasecki families, rests between one area being preserved and is a bridge to a second piece the Sierra Foothill Conservancy wants to add. The 680-acre property also has two ponds and areas that are more level, which could have attracted developers, said Logan Page, stewardship director for the conservancy.

The conservancy seeks land that is contiguous to other property it manages, slowly expanding areas that are being preserved, Tuitele-Lewis said.

And "if there is a contiguous piece or missing link, we will work to protect it," she said.

The Sierra Foothill Conservancy, funded through memberships, corporate sponsors, its foundation, state funding and some federal dollars, owns and manages 6,000 acres in Fresno, Madera and Mariposa counties. Those properties include five preserves and 21 legal land-owner agreements that protect 9,000 more acres of private land through conservation easements. About 10 land trusts operate in the Valley and Sierra.

Black Mountain sits south of Sierra High School, about five miles south of Auberry, and is the highest peak foothill visitors face before they turn east onto Highway 168's four-lane road to Shaver Lake.

Atop the mountain, there are unobstructed western views of the San Joaquin Valley, and snow-capped mountains line the eastern vista.

Black Mountain preservation began in 1996 when 360 acres were donated by Dr. Bill Miller. Since then, four more pieces of land were added either through purchase, easements or donations.

The mountain is available for hikes with permission from the conservancy, Tuitele-Lewis said.

But easements often remain private property, and hikers are barred on that land when it remains a working ranch, she said.

By preserving the land, archaeological resources are also safer, said John Pryor, chairman of Fresno State's anthropology department.

And ranching, he said, is a sound alternative to homes.

"Most of the ranchers I have met are people who have a strong idea of conserving the land," Pryor said.

Page, whose family has 280 acres in a conservation easement on Black Mountain, said ranchers see advantages to easement agreements, because they provide working capital for ranchers and lower the tax burden on ranchers.

But in addition, Page said, "this is one way to make sure land remains as it is."

The reporter can be reached at mbenjamin@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6166.

